Trust and Decision-making in Times of Crisis

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Trust and Decision-making in Times of Crisis: The EU's Response to the Events in Ukraine

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Abstract

It is a common assumption that through decades of co-operation there has been an emergence of trust between the Member States of the European Union. Yet, we have little evidence about the nature of trust and its implications for decision-making, in particular in times of crisis. Hence, our article's central question: how does trust matter in the process of decision-making during crisis? Our argument is that uncertainty during the crisis enabled trust-building between the actors: Member States and European institutions. In the case of the Ukrainian crisis, this happened in parallel to the decreasing levels of trust in EU–Russia relations. Consequently, the EU was able to agree and implement the instruments of coercive power. To illustrate our argument, we look at the adoption of EU sanctions in reaction to the annexation of Crimea, the downing of the Malaysian Airlines MH17 plane and the war in Donbass.

Keywords: European foreign policy; trust; power; Ukraine; Russia

Introduction

The crisis in Ukraine brought security concerns close to home, which somewhat unexpectedly led to the European Union (EU) taking a leading role at an early stage of crisis. Given previous long-term divergences among Member States and their unilateral policies towards Russia, many questioned whether the EU would have been able to adopt any meaningful action in response to Russian involvement in the crisis (MacFarlane and Menon, 2014). Simultaneously, trust between Member States became an open question. Many expected that energy, trade and financial interdependencies would have prevented some Member States from agreeing on sanctions. It was unclear whether Germany and France could be trusted to forge an agreement with Russia and Ukraine that would take into account the EU interests as a whole. Notwithstanding these fears, the EU adopted a series of comprehensive, invasive and costly sanctions and with its support, Germany and France engaged in the negotiations with Russia and Ukraine.

This article aims to examine this process. The innovativeness of our approach lies in bringing the notion of trust into the analysis of the dynamics between the EU Member States during crisis. This element has been neglected so far, despite the established place that trust has gained in the literature on International Relations and, more broadly, in the social sciences. While this Special Issue focuses on understanding EU power during Ukrainian crisis, we believe that exploring the role of trust allows us to capture better the dynamics between the actors and examine how it may constrain or enable the EU's actions. This Special Issue's focus on crisis highlights the element of uncertainty during decision-making and links it to trust as the backbone of relations in densely

institutionalized social milieu. We treat trust as something that evolves and cannot be taken for granted, even among partners that have been socialized into working together for decades, as has been the case in the EU. Our understanding of trust departs from a purely utilitarian one, as we assume that the concept of trust is inevitably linked with uncertainty. Trust therefore must involve a 'leap of faith' in the context of accepted dependency and vulnerability.

Did trust matter in the process of decision-making during the crisis in Ukraine? How is the EU's external power linked to the question of trust? Our argument is that exceptional crisis circumstances characterized by fundamental uncertainties enabled an apparently paradoxical change in the level of trust between the EU Member States and institutions. This 'intra-EU trust' increased in parallel to the decreasing trust in relations with Russia. The convergence of EU actors regarding their distrust towards Russia enabled them also to overcome the divergences originating from the disparate relationship of trust between individual Member States and Russia, which had constrained collective actions during the pre-crisis period. Hence, these parallel shifts in the relationships of trust can help us understand the EU decisiveness in reaction to the Russian involvement in the war in Ukraine.

This article proceeds as follows: we first briefly outline the analytical framework and then explain how the changing levels of trust in the EU contributed to an agreement on EU sanctions against Russia. In our analysis, we pay special attention to three decisive crisis episodes: the annexation of Crimea, the downing of the Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 and the outbreak of conflict in Eastern Ukraine. Finally, we summarize our findings and highlight their relevance for further research.

I. Trust, Decision-making and EU Power in Crisis

The key question of this article concerns the role of trust in the EU decision-making process and, consequently, the way in which 'trusting relationships' matter for the EU's power in international relations during crisis. The EU has often been mentioned by International Relations scholars as a case wherein trust, over time, facilitated international collaboration (Booth and Wheeler, 2008; Kydd, 2005; Mercer, 2014, pp. 525–529). Despite this, we know little about trust in the context of Common Foreign and Security Policy, even though the EU studies literature reveals details about informal processes and norms present in decision-making that provide a rich context to this study.

There is ample evidence of intense socialization processes ongoing among the national diplomats and officials from the European institutions almost since the start of the European Political Cooperation (EPC) and later CFSP (see, for example, Allen *et al*., 1982, p. 13; Cross, 2011; Juncos and Pomorska, 2006, 2014; Meyer, 2006; Nuttall, 1992; Smith, 2004; Tonra, 2001). These processes have led to the emergence of an informal code of conduct and certain 'ways of doing things' in Brussels. In this sense, intense social interaction contributed to a greater familiarity and predictability of how the other Member States' representatives or diplomats act. There is also some evidence on the shared norms and beliefs about the European integration process and the EU's role in the world (Juncos and Pomorska, 2015) as well as the emergence of the 'we-feeling' among those involved in the making of European foreign policy. This pool of studies

gives important clues about trust. The 'we-feeling' and forming a new identity has been associated in the literature with overcoming mistrust (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p. 233). It is believed that trust requires partners to behave in a reliable way, with predictable actions and attitudes (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p. 244). Ladrech and Sabbatier (2005, p. 500) emphasized that trust correlates with stakeholders' confidence in the legitimacy of consensus-based decision-making and in the fairness of their specific collaborative project. All this points to the fact that the densely institutionalized European foreign policy is likely to contribute to high levels of trust between Member States and their representatives.

At the same time, the broader literature on trust urges us to be careful when it comes to assuming the presence of trust, even in long-term relationships of 'like-minded' group members (Uslaner, 2002, p. 21). Increased familiarity does not automatically lead to an increase in trust. Mistrust can emerge and make social exchanges even more difficult given previous betrayal or opportunistic abuse of vulnerable positions of trusting partners or when third parties implement a 'divide and rule' strategy aimed at undermining a common position towards the evolving critical events. Therefore, we cannot take the presence of high levels of trust for granted.

In the context of European foreign policy, we have already known for a while that under normal circumstances Member States 'keep everyone on-board' and avoid isolating any of their partners (Tonra, 2001; Juncos and Pomorska, 2006). What we lack is evidence on what happens in a crisis. In fact, the usual criticism directed at the socialization literature points out that Brussels' norms are unlikely to be internalized to the extent that they would be respected under extreme circumstances and that the national representatives would display loyalties predominantly towards their own countries. This contribution looks precisely at the moment of crisis and allows us to see whether the norms are respected even then.

How can we define and identify trust? Although it is a fundamental social science concept, there is still little agreement of what it constitutes, how it emerges and how it can be best identified. The well-established rational choice approach to trust, which puts the weighing of costs and benefits at the centre of trusting relationships (Coleman, 1990; Hardin, 2002, 2006; Kydd, 2005) has been criticized for ignoring the human factor (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p. 232; Hollis, 1998) and the 'emotional base' of trust (Mercer, 2005).

Bearing in mind these discussions, our understanding of trust is based on the work of Booth and Wheeler (2008, p. 230): 'Trust exists when two or more actors, based on the mutual interpretation of each other's attitude and behaviour, believe that the other(s) now and in the future, can be relied upon to desist from acting in ways that will be injurious to their interests and values'. Trust is to be considered as a continuum between functional co-operation (whereby trust emerges from confidence) and interpersonal bonding (where trust is a bond linked to emotions and may derive for example from friendship).

To operationalize this broad definition of trust we follow Hoffmann's (2002, p. 377) suggestion and focus on trusting relationships, which are considered to be the empirical manifestation of trust. We combine the reported presence of trust (or its lack) with the interpretation of behaviour: information-sharing (which occurs more easily in the case of trusting relationships), respecting each other's vulnerabilities and delegation of tasks to the lower levels of decision-making (decentralization). We therefore expect to see trusting

relationships (or lack thereof) reported by interviewees; we expect it to manifest itself through more open information-sharing and through behaviour that does not take advantage of partners' vulnerable positions towards Russia. Finally, if we see more delegation and decentralization in the way in which decisions are made throughout the crisis, we also interpret this as an indication of the presence of trust.

As this Special Issue focuses on the external dimension of the EU's power, we discuss the possible implications that trust within the EU may have on its capacity to exercise power towards Russia. Scant attention has been paid to whether and how power and trust are interrelated in spite of apparent shared ontological and epistemological backgrounds linking both concepts. Power and trust are inherently relational and shape the conditions of actors' performance. They develop in interactions between actors and determine actors' scope for action. Consequently, power and trust can be characterized by different degrees of vulnerability and dependency of actors (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p. 233; Lake, 2009). Luhmann's (1979) contribution suggests that power and trust intervene as separate mechanisms ordering social interactions, and in particular, social control and co-ordination of expectations (Bachmann, 2006; Bradach and Eccles, 1989). The dissociation of trust from power emerges from the different assumptions about actors' future behaviour. In trusting relations, an actor assumes 'optimistically' that another actor will behave in line with his preferences, but in power relations, an actor assumes 'pessimistically' the possibility of undesirable behaviour and attempts to ensure compliance through coercion and threats of sanctions (Bachmann, 2001, p. 350). Hence, the more distrustful the relations between actors, the more they will rely on coercive instruments of power to enforce expected behaviour. This is crucial during crises when trusting relationships are challenged.

This Special Issue deals with crisis to which trust is tightly linked: on the one hand, trust develops under uncertainty (if things are certain then one does not need 'to trust'); on the other, it is a heuristic device that people use to cope with crisis and with the condition of uncertainty (Booth and Wheeler, 2008, p. 230). Uncertainty occurs when 'agents cannot anticipate the outcome of a decision and cannot assign probabilities to the outcome' (Beckert, 1996, p. 804) given that information is not available, highly ambiguous or contradictory (Rathbun, 2007). Trusting relationships may have a positive effect when it comes to dealing with crisis. If they prevail in the EU, its reaction may be quicker since actors will not engage in long searches for reliable information and trust the analysis and evidence provided by the partners. When actors expect that future actions will not be harmful to them, they will be more willing to delegate certain decisions and their implementation.

In this context, the variation in the relations of trust played an important role in addressing three issues. Firstly, the distrust towards Russia mobilized the Member States to speak with one voice and to support diplomatic measures with coercive instruments. The increase of trust between the Member States proceeded simultaneously to the convergence in the mistrust between the EU and Russia. Secondly, the respect shown by the Member States and the EU institutions regarding vulnerabilities and consequences of sanctions for individual Member States contributed to the development of trusting relationships in the Council and enabled the EU to address increasingly sensitive issues. Thirdly, the trusting relationships among Member States facilitated the decentralization of decisions in parallel to the extension of their scope.

To interpret whether trust enabled the decisions on sanctions during extremely volatile crises, we relied on diversified data sources: daily news reports, mainly from *EUObserver*, *Agence Europe*, *EuroPolitics*, *EurActiv*, *Financial Times* (and its Brussels Blog) and other international press, available primary sources,[1] and confidential interviews with several national diplomats representing four Member States involved directly in working contacts with other EU diplomats managing the crisis in Ukraine. We employed these data to carefully reconstruct day-by-day dynamics of decision-making in the period between February 2014 and February 2015. This reconstruction contextualized our interpretation of the motive of trust in actors' practices. Our interpretive approach relied on extracting explicit and implicit trust-related motives from available evidence. Therefore, we have blended the explicit motive of trust in actors' self-reporting on subjective meaning of their actions with their implicit understandings derived from the dynamics of actors' interactions.

II. Unexpected EU Engagement in the Crisis

The EU Member States came to several agreements on a common approach towards the crisis in Ukraine since its very beginning in March 2014, when they declared support to Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity and far-reaching political, economic and social transformation based on the implementation of the Association Agreement (Council of the European Union, 2014a; European Council, 2014a, 2014b). Because of Russia's destabilizing role, the EU changed its traditional accommodating approach and adopted a two-track policy. On the one hand, it engaged with Russia in a diplomatic dialogue to mediate the conflict and influence Russian policy towards Ukraine in trade and energy. On the other hand, it adopted a very critical stance on the Russian annexation of Crimea and involvement in the war in Donbass (Natorski, 2016). To underline this policy, the EU publicly condemned Russia and adopted a series of sanctions in reaction to the three key episodes of the crisis: the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, the downing of the Malaysian Airlines flight MH 17 in July 2014 and the war in Eastern Ukraine ongoing until February 2015 when a ceasefire was reached in the second Minsk agreement.

The degree of consensus reached by the Member States in the Council was unexpected for two reasons: the repeated experiences of ineffective EU policies towards Russia and the divergent views on the short-term Russian reactions to the EU positions. The key feature of EU–Russia relations was the variation of Member States' bilateral relations encompassing special relationships, pragmatic economic-driven exchanges and sustained conflicts (David *et al*., 2013; Leonard and Popescu, 2007). Consequently, the intra-EU trust was continuously undermined by conflicts among the Member States. It was frequently emphasized that special relations of some Member States (France, Germany) ran contrary to the interests and preferences of other Member States (Poland, Lithuania or Estonia). For example, Germany's privileged relations with Russia in the energy field, symbolized by the North Stream gas pipeline, faced strong opposition in other Member States, most notably

[1] The dataset of primary documents included documents produced by EU institutions: speeches and statements of EU representatives; available meetings' agendas, working documents, meetings' minutes and conclusions; and, legal acts on sanctions. We also watched the national representatives' declarations (in English, French, Spanish, German, Italian, Polish and Dutch) before and after European Councils; and Foreign Affairs Councils' meetings in the period February 2014–February 2015.

Poland. It also explains why the Polish government promoted the notion of 'European solidarity' in energy with a view to constrain bilateral relations (Roth, 2011).

The relations between Russia and the Member States developed against the background of different historical experiences that underlined the different levels of trust in Russian intentions. Many believed that Russia purposefully generated conflicts with some Member States to undermine intra-EU solidarity and common positions (Schmidt-Felzmann, 2014). The cases of trade sanctions against Poland; energy, commercial and historical disputes with Baltic States; and diplomatic clashes with the United Kingdom (Roth, 2009) are only a few examples (see, for example, Council of the European Union, 2008, 2013). Consequently, the co-operative bilateral relations between selected EU Member States and Russia reinforced the mistrust of other states, constrained the achievement of the EU's common policies and facilitated Russian divide-and-rule tactics. This had been the case with the Eastern Partnership initiative (EaP) launched in 2008. Developing good relations with Russia was a priority for some Member States, which heavily influenced intra-EU debates on the features of this multilateral track of the European Neighbourhood Policy (Wojna and Gniazdowski, 2009). The EU tried to avoid confrontation with Russia over this initiative even in the context of the Russia–Georgia war in August 2008 and invited Russia to participate in the Eastern Partnership Information and Coordination Group including also the US, Turkey, Norway, Switzerland, Canada, Japan, the EBRD, EIB and World Bank. In parallel, after years of rifts, Poland, one of the initiative's advocates (Copsey and Pomorska, 2014) and Russia normalized their bilateral relations symbolized by Putin's visit to Gdansk on the occasion of the World War II anniversary in 2009. Therefore, in spite of some initial Russian concerns about the geopolitical ramifications of the Eastern Partnership, the EU assumed that the accommodating approach would avoid confrontation with Russia in the shared neighbourhood. The EU representatives later justified their approach claiming that Russia 'never said a word about what was going on with the association agreement or its negotiation' with Eastern Partnership countries until the summer of 2013 (see Pierre Vimont in House of Lords, European Union Committee, 2015, p. 338). Taking into account these previous experiences, it was expected that the EU would not be able to adopt decisions that in practice meant confronting Russia about its role in Ukraine.

During the negotiations, Member States presented diverging positions on the crisis, the suitability of policy approach and the employment of specific policy instruments. Extraordinary meetings of the Foreign Affairs Council and the European Council in March 2014 reflected the willingness of some states to adopt sanctions against Russia while others preferred to explore diplomatic options. Different political and economic interests, arguably, explained these divergences. For example, commentators speculated that German economic and energy dependency on Russia, French contracts on Mistral helicopter carriers, and British financial interests would constraint their respective positions and paralyze collective decision-making in endless quarrels leading to the lowest common denominator outcome. Austria, Hungary, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Cyprus, Finland, Greece, Luxembourg, the Netherlands and Spain started off from rather reluctant positions on sanctions to avoid economic harm resulting from Russian reactions (Schult *et al*., 2014). Notwithstanding these expectations, the Council adopted increasingly far-reaching sanctions enabled by the shifts in trusting relationships with Russia and inside the EU.

Unifying Mistrust Towards Russia

Russian pressure on Ukraine before the Vilnius Summit created tensions in EU–Russia relations even before the annexation of Crimea. For example, on the occasion of the EU–Russia summit in January 2014, the European Commission President declared that the co-operation between the EU and Russia needs 'mutual understanding and strategic trust' and expected 'open discussion' and 'honest, forward-looking dialogue' (European Commission, 2014a). However, the tensions were only aggravated during the annexation of Crimea and the war in Donbass. The EU unequivocally indicated Russia as the only responsible party for the developments in Crimea since the very beginning of the crisis. The EU also noted continuous dissonance between the Russian declarations and its actions on the ground. These 'hybrid war' tactics enhance opponents' uncertainty (Freedman, 2014, pp. 21–24), but they also increase their mistrust towards the perpetrators of any exposed manipulation. For example, the EU refuted Putin's (2014a) claims that only local defence forces annexed Crimea in reaction to the Ukrainian coup d'état. In view of these tactics, the Member States quickly realized that the ambiguity in their position would be misused by Russia and adopted an unusually blunt language by condemning 'the unprovoked violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and territorial integrity by the Russian Federation and call on the Russian Federation to immediately withdraw its armed forces to the areas of their permanent stationing' (European Council, 2014a).

The persistent gap between the Russian declarations and actions contributed to the growing uncertainty about the Russian intentions. The EU distrusted Russia, as it believed that its government used disinformation as one of the instruments in the conflict. Remarkably, German Chancellor Merkel, who had the closest personal relationship with President Putin, warned other EU leaders that he 'could not be trusted' given that during the crisis in Crimea 'he had lied to her several times and made promises that he then proceeded to break' (*Der Spiegel*, 2014). The EU representatives criticized the 'mixed messages coming from Moscow' about the conflict resolution in Ukraine and regretted that 'strong Russian State sponsored nationalist propaganda continues supporting the illegal actions of armed separatists' (European Council, 2014c, p. 2).

Although the Member States had held different attitudes towards Russia, the mistrust not only mobilized them to adopt a collective response, but also influenced the balance between the use of diplomatic engagement and coercive measures. All Member States supported diplomatic solutions to the crisis, but they initially differed on the use of sanctions. The growing mistrust towards Russia enabled the EU to combine diplomatic engagement with the threat of sanctions, signalling distrust of Russian claims to honour its commitments. At first, the EU used rather generic warnings, but given Russia's behaviour, it clarified its position to force the fulfilment of diplomatic commitments. Chancellor Merkel emphasized, as did many other EU leaders, that 'if there are no diplomatic options of any kind, if there is no progress on Russia's side, sanctions must be taken' (Agence Europe, 2014a). After several unsuccessful diplomatic initiatives, the German Minister of Defence affirmed that 'Russia is not a partner. Partners adhere to joint agreements' and emphasized that 'Russia has destroyed a massive amount of trust' (von der Leyen, 2014). When Russia refused to continue talks in the Geneva format (EU, US, Russia and Ukraine) arguing cynically that the agreement was not implemented (BBC, 2014) the EU called Russia 'to take effective steps with regard to fulfilling the commitments

taken in Geneva' (Council of the European Union, 2014b). The EU's High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy indicated that the failure of the Geneva talks would reactivate the consideration of further sanctions (Rettman, 2014). The subsequent Russian boycott of the Geneva talks and parallel threats concerning energy supplies limited diplomatic options and enabled a more coercive stance.

Following the growing mistrust towards Russia, the EU specified the conditions of sanctions. Due to Russia's reluctance to engage in any meaningful negotiations on the peace plan for Eastern Ukraine, in June 2014 the EU linked the use of sanctions to the fulfilment of four specific conditions within a limited time frame of four days (European Council, 2014d). Given that these steps 'have not been adequately taken' (European Council, 2014e), the EU proceeded to extend its sanctions and justified the introduction of sectoral sanctions by the fact that EU appeal to 'the Russian leadership to work towards a peaceful resolution … has been, in practice, left unheeded' (European Council, 2014c, p. 2). Similar conditionality has been applied ever since. The EU emphasized that 'the complete implementation of the Minsk agreements' on ceasefire adopted in September 2014 and February 2015 had specified in detail the conditions for lifting sanctions and reminded of 'the Russian authorities' responsibility in this regard' (European Council, 2015, p. 4). The European Council President's remark that 'words put down on paper must translate into real deeds' (Tusk, 2015) illustrates the distrust about the prospects of de-escalation of the situation in Ukraine even after ceasefire had been agreed in February 2015 and confirmed that sanctions were being used to reinforce its implementation. The EU backed diplomatic mediation, but with the support of coercive tools, given the mistrust of Russian intentions.

Mutual Respect for Member States' Vulnerabilities

One of the most sensitive issues throughout the duration of the crisis was the different degrees to which Member States would be affected by the sanctions and possible Russian retaliation. For the development of trust, we argue, it was crucial to ensure the most vulnerable states felt supported by their partners. As noted by a former high-level national diplomat, Member States are faced with a question of whether their partners would always act 'in a good faith' (Interview 1 with national diplomat, 19 March 2015). Another diplomat recognized that instrumentally you can always doubt any information and say no, but he also stressed that 'there is certain trust around the table in other's professionalism' (Interview 2 with national diplomat, 29 April 2015). For another diplomat, the fact that Member States shared and explained to one another their preferences and vulnerabilities was already proof of a trusting relationship (Interview 3 with national diplomat, 20 March 2015).

During an emergency European Council in March 2014, Member States agreed on a very general three-phase approach to the introduction of sanctions against Russia. This was done within the framework of a much broader approach to the Ukraine crisis, including diplomatic negotiations, involvement of other international institutions and the support for economic and political transformation in Ukraine after Euromaidan. The EU adopted limited diplomatic sanctions, suspending some bilateral talks (phase one) and decided to postpone individual travel bans and asset freezes (phase two) as well as economic sanctions (phase three) (European Council, 2014a). The agreement balanced different

positions of the Member States. Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia favoured sanctions; Poland, France and the UK supported them with some reservations; Germany and Italy were also in favour, but with less enthusiasm; and the Netherlands and Luxembourg were hesitant (Agence Europe, 2014b). All Member States agreed on the need to adopt a common position, but the uncertainties about the consequences of sanctions justified their reluctant positions. For example, although Poland supported the sanctions, its Prime Minister noted that 'sanctions, particularly from the second stage, could harm everybody' (Agence Europe, 2014a). Similarly, the British Prime Minister warned that 'the situation in Ukraine remains highly precarious – the slightest miscalculation could see it spiral out of control' (Cameron, 2014).

The progressive approach to the introduction of sanctions enabled trust-building among the Member States. Countries with different degrees of uncertainty about Russia's intentions saw that the implementation of common positions respected their vulnerabilities. Even limited signals of prioritizing the common EU stance over bilateral interests created the dynamics of mutual trust-building. For example, German diplomats pushed for the exclusion of Russia from the G-8 even though they were, as perceived by a national diplomat, 'genuinely sad, heartbroken and in pain', proving that Germany could be trusted as a country representing common interests (Interview 3 with a national diplomat, 20 March 2015). National diplomats from one of the 'vulnerable' states claimed that it was unthinkable for any diplomat present during the Council negotiations to talk in terms of national interest (Interview 4 with national diplomat, 15 December 2015) and countries preferred to outline the sensitive nature of some aspects of sanctions in order to find a compromise (Interview 2 with a national diplomat, 29 April 2015). Such attitudes facilitated the follow-up of a specific approach and its further extensions.

The trust-building process, based on respecting individual vulnerabilities could also be observed, for example, when the EU introduced individual sanctions. The initially lower degree of trust may be exemplified by the process of the preparation of travel bans and asset freezes against Russian and Crimean officials. Member States were unable to come to an agreement during the preparatory meetings of the Political and Security Committee and the Committee of Permanent Representatives (COREPER II). Consequently, the deliberations on the list of individuals subject to sanctions exceptionally took place at the level of Foreign Ministers. When the Council had to decide on the list of sanctioned individuals, the criteria for their selection proved the most sensitive aspect of the debate. This was due to Russia's unpredictable reactions. Many Member States hesitated on whether to restrict the list to the officials only from Crimea or to include also politicians from Russia. After heated debates, the Council decided to introduce sanctions against 21 individuals, both from Crimea and Russia 'responsible for actions which undermine or threaten the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine' (Council of the European Union, 2014c). The European Council agreed a few days later on extending the visa travel bans and asset freezes to 33 persons, including high-ranking Russia politicians and officials. As explained by the Polish Prime Minister, the negotiations 'gave rise to a considerable amount of emotion, as certain countries sought to negotiate, to correct (the list) on the basis, for example, of their relationship with the individuals' (Agence Europe, 2014c).

The difficulties in reaching a common position could be explained by the expectation of Russian retaliatory actions and, as explained by some European diplomats, 'an attempt

to divide and expose the vulnerabilities of the EU', especially in energy policy (Waterfield and Freeman, 2014). However, the EU addressed these vulnerabilities by adopting a common stance on the Russian energy threats. The European Commission President, mandated by all Member States, replied to Putin's selective message to 18 Member States, in which he proposed consultations on Russian threats of disrupting energy supplies to Europe (see European Commission 2014b; Putin, 2014b). Therefore, in spite of above initial difficulties, the multiple extensions of visa travel bans and asset freezes took place without comparable quarrels and the EU measures affected 149 individuals, including Russian oligarchs and decision-makers, and 37 other entities. The precedence created by the first decision and the time to assess its consequences streamlined the decision-making dynamics and set the path to include more individuals in the future in a very 'sober, professional and without emotional atmosphere' (Interview 2 with national diplomat, 29 April 2015).

The dynamics of its approval illustrated again how the respect for Member States' vulnerabilities and common uncertainties contributed to trust-building among the Member States. At first, Member States disagreed whether the Russian annexation of Crimea constituted a motive to introduce economic sanctions. The European Council initially threatened 'far reaching consequences for relations in a broad range of economic areas between the EU and its Member States' (European Council, 2014a), but after the annexation many Member States concerned about possible negative economic consequences for the EU opposed economic sanctions (Agence Europe, 2014d). Consequently, the approval of economic sanctions remained contentious. For example, the European Council agreed in July 2014 only on the expansion of targeted sanctions to entities 'that are materially or financially supporting actions undermining or threatening Ukraine's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and independence', and called for suspension of new operations with EIB and EBRD and bilateral and regional EU–Russia co-operation programmes (European Council, 2014e). Still, the Member States postponed again the approval of economic sanctions. However, the commotion after the Malaysian Airlines flight MH17 crash in mid-July with hundreds of European citizens on board triggered the decision on the adoption of the third phase of economic sanctions several days later also because of respecting states' vulnerabilities. The downing of the plane increased uncertainty and escalated the crisis. Russia, on its part, stepped-up its disinformation campaign aimed at blaming the Ukrainians for the shoot-down.

Member States agreed on the sanctions following the reassurances on the equal distribution of any subsequent economic burden. Van Rompuy declared that the package of discussed sanctions 'strikes the right balance when it comes to cost/benefit ratio and scalability/reversibility over time' and stated: 'it should have a strong impact on Russia's economy while keeping a moderate effect on EU economies'. Furthermore, he assured that the discussed sanctions took into account Member States concerns and the Commission would assess the impact on European economies and inform the capitals (*Financial Times*, 2014). Those Member States that would be most affected trusted not only Van Rompuy's declarations but also the other Council members, which were expected to honour the agreement. The European Commission President, in a public statement, emphasized that 'the final decision now lies with the EU's Member States, but I believe that is an effective, well-targeted and balanced package providing the flexibility to adjust our reaction to changes on the ground' (European Commission,

2014c). Member States also established a mechanism to optimize consistency in the application and monitoring of the restrictive measures by improving information sharing, co-ordination and effectiveness between the Member States and the EU institutions. To minimize the risks of circumventing sanctions, the mechanism addressed the problems of legal interpretation, monitoring of effects on targeted countries and the EU, and identifying loopholes and the so-called 'substitution effect' (Council of the European Union, 2014d).

The extension of economic sanctions in September 2014 followed and affected the economic sectors already addressed in previous decisions. Consequently, the Member States extended the economic sanctions with less hesitation. In the context of Russia's direct military involvement in Eastern Ukraine in August 2014, including weapon supplies through the so-called 'humanitarian convoys', the European Council emphasized its readiness to 'to take significant further steps, in light of the evolution of the situation on the ground' (European Council, 2014f, p. 4). Initially Finland, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic tried to delay the introduction of any new measures given the incipient ceasefire in Eastern Ukraine and claimed ineffectiveness of already adopted sanctions. However, other countries preferred to implement them quickly. Even countries like Belgium, Luxembourg and Denmark, who were earlier hesitant, openly supported the adoption of new sanctions in view of the inability to stop Russian action through diplomatic means only (Agence Europe, 2014e). To overcome any reluctance, European Council and European Commission Presidents reassured that the new sanctions followed the same criteria of 'effectiveness, cost/benefit, balance across sectors and Member States, international coordination, reversibility/scalability, legal defensibility/ease of enforcement' (European Commission, 2014d).

Finally, the question of trust between the Member States was directly linked with the engagement of Germany and France in the so-called Minsk talks in the Normandy format that produced a ceasefire in February 2015. The interviewed national diplomats, even from countries such as Poland where, according to one interviewee, there is almost an 'institutionalized' level of mistrust towards its Western neighbour, claimed that there was no decrease in trust towards Germany (Interview 5 with national diplomat, 19 March 2015). On the contrary, the conduct during the negotiations and intense information-sharing practice, in particular Merkel's efforts to keep the partners on-board through not only Brussels channels but also bilaterally (Interview 5 with national diplomat, 19 March 2015) somewhat re-assured them about Germany 'acting in good faith'. Germany and France, well aware of representing the EU in very sensitive matter, consulted the positions with other partners and reported back on the progress of talks conducted in the Normandy format in order to maintain the common EU position on the relation between sanctions and cease-fire (Interviews 3 and 6 with national diplomats, 20 March and 21 April 2015). National diplomats were satisfied with the information received and regarded them as solid and unproblematic (Interview 2 with national diplomat, 29 April 2015). Moreover, the fact that Germany and France acted on behalf of the EU, but without a formal common mandate reflected the trusting relationship among the Member States. Even though Germany during Minsk negotiations preferred the controversial option of freezing the conflict, its efforts received leverage when all Member States declared their readiness to adopt further sanctions (Interview 6 with national diplomat, 21 April 2015).

Decentralization of Decision-making

The key discussions on the response to the crisis took place at regular and extraordinary meetings of the Foreign Affairs Council (FAC) and European Council in March 2014 in light of the annexation of Crimea. Given the volatility of the situation and sensitiveness of decisions, the Member States marginalized the lower levels of decision-making and EU institutions in shaping these decisions. However, the EU institutions and committees progressively assumed greater responsibilities. Most significantly, Member States asked the EEAS and the European Commission to prepare policy proposals that constituted the basis for the adoption of sensitive decisions by the COREPER II and the RELEX Working Group. Moreover, the EEAS and the Commission also provided important intelligence information to all actors. For example, only in March 2014 the EU Satellite Centre prepared more than 100 reports on Crimea with information on military activity and facilities, infrastructure, border crossing points and industrial facilities related to weapons of mass destruction (Touron, 2014).

The Commission and the EEAS reinforced the relations of trust between Member States by balancing their vulnerabilities and uncertainties in the preparation of policy options and played key roles in the provision of information to the Member States. The European Council tasked the Commission and the EEAS to 'take forward preparatory work' on travel bans and asset freezes, and the Commission and the Member States to prepare targeted measures in economic sectors (European Council, 2014b). Following this mandate, they effectively prepared the next rounds of targeted measures trying to address individual sensitivities of Member States (Interview 2 with national diplomat, 29 April 2015). Both regularly informed the Member States on available policy options during COREPRER II and COEST weekly meetings. For example, in April 2014, the European Commission submitted a policy paper presenting how different intensity of sanctions would affect the economies of the Member States. Assuming the most intense sanctions regime with a ban on gas imports from Russia, the European Commission even conducted stress tests in the case of gas supplies disruptions (Pop and Rettman, 2014). Other proposals with policy options included positions on the non-recognition policy regarding Crimea and on legal consequences of the annexation of Crimea related to the EU–Russia agreements (Council of the European Union, 2014d) as well as proposals for measures to restrict trade with and investment in Crimea/Sevastopol (European Commission/EEAS, 2014). Thus, the EEAS and Commission framed numerous decisions despite the fact that, as had been remarked upon by a diplomat, it would always be possible to have potential doubts about their independence (Interview 2 with national diplomat, 29 April 2015).

The decision on economic sanctions adopted in July 2014 reflected the brokering role of both institutions. As the war in Eastern Ukraine intensified and given that Russia did not meet the conditions set by the European Council regarding the de-escalation of conflict (European Council, 2014e), the EU launched a process of preparation of another round of sanctions in COREPER II. The EEAS, including the European Union Intelligence Analysis Centre, informed the COREPER about the security situation in Ukraine and the fulfilment of conditions established by the European Council. The European Commission provided information about different options regarding the financial co-operation with Russia as well as the ongoing trilateral consultations (EU–Russia–Ukraine)

on trade consequences of the implementation of the Association Agreement and on gas supplies to Ukraine. After rounds of discussions, the Member States extended the scope of already approved sanctions, but still hesitated on full-scale economic sector sanctions during the European Council (2014e).

After the downing of the Malaysian Airlines flight, the Foreign Affairs Council requested the EEAS and the Commission to finalize the preparatory works on economic sanctions but did not formally approve the sanctions. The EEAS and the Commission presented comprehensive policy options for sector sanctions, including access to capital markets and dual use goods. They also assessed the possible impact of adopted measures. These papers seemed to address appropriately Member States concerns and sensitive sectoral vulnerabilities (Pop, 2014). The ground-breaking decision on economic sanctions was taken at the level of COREPER II and finalized at the working level of officials within the RELEX Working Group who prepared all necessary legal instruments adopted formally in a written procedure by the Council. The deliberations on sanctions proceeded on the basis of information provided by the EEAS and the Commission. As we have shown, the final impulse for the adoption of the third-phase sanctions came from the European Council President. In order to avoid another emergency meeting of the European Council, requested by several Member States, he asked the leaders to delegate the adoption of the decision to COREPER II.

Finally, the EEAS and the Commission led the monitoring of the sanctions' effectiveness. As recalled by the European Council President, the Member States (at the level of COREPER) would assess the implementation of the peace plan. This review would set the basis for any possible amendment, suspension or repeal of the sanctions (European Council, 2014g). This increasing role of transnational institutional actors also reflected their close association to the dynamics of negotiations within the Normandy format (Interview 4 with national diplomat, 15 December 2015), which is key in the context of the implementation of Minsk ceasefires and sanctions' conditionality.

Conclusion

The article has analyzed the role of trust inside the EU and in EU–Russia relations and how it mattered for the way in which the EU acted in crisis. We argued that trust mattered when mistrust towards Russia helped to unite the Member States in a common response; when respecting each other's vulnerabilities facilitated the agreement; and when trusting relationships contributed to decentralized decision-making and the involvement of actors such as the European Commission and the European External Action Service. Empirically, we have shown evidence that it has enabled the Member States to respect the norms of co-operation in which they were socialized (Sjursen and Rosen, this issue) and to respect partners' vulnerabilities. This does not only refer to the formal discourse, but, more profoundly, to the internal situation in the Council. Germany and France were trusted to conduct negotiations and even though it may seem now that such a course of action was predictable and preferable, we cannot take it for granted. The track record of the EU's crisis management shows there is always an option of non-action or bilateral action, undermining the EU's efforts. We have also shown that the European Commission and the EEAS were entrusted with important tasks during the crisis. This is remarkable

especially in the case of the EEAS, which has faced considerable criticism in its first years of existence, coming from the Member States.

Having said that, we do not argue that trust is always and in all circumstances a 'good thing'. In fact, it has been argued in the literature that trust can be dangerous in world politics (Booth and Wheeler 2008, p. 231) and that sometimes distrust may serve as an incentive for the creation of improved institutions and facilitate collaboration, not hinder it (Cook *et al*., 2005, p. 2). Trust as such cannot solve all of society's problems nor those of CFSP (Uslaner, 2002, p. 249). However, one could argue it is a necessary element and a 'glue' that keeps the Member States together.

It is important to remember that trust matters most in times of uncertainty and crisis. This is why it is easy to forget its value when the EU is conducting its 'business as usual' and there is no need on the part of the Member States to show a 'leap of faith' towards their partners. The levels of trust play a role in determining how the EU responds to crisis and whether it is able to act in a unified manner. What happens during crisis, in turn, will then also influence the levels of trust in post-crisis situations.

Finally, there is a question raised by the Editors of this Special Issue (Cross and Karolewski, this issue) regarding the ways in which the crisis uncertainty shapes the changes in relationships of trust inside and outside the EU as factors enabling the exercise of EU power. We have engaged here with the internal dynamics of relationships between the Member States. We have shown that trust matters when it comes to the capability of the EU to adopt collective actions on the employment of coercive power instruments. This is a pre-condition of the EU's exercise of power.

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